

Cult of Saddam Lives On

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Teachers finding it hard to tackle years of Baathist indoctrination.

Teacher Khula Hussein entered her classroom at Baghdad's al-Idrisi primary school for boys at the beginning of term last October to find, as expected, her third grade class in a state of disorder. "All rise," she said.

But she was shocked as the pupils leaped to their feet and shouted, "Long live the leader, Saddam!. " Don't you ever say that," she shouted in horror. "He's gone for good."

For years, Baathist education officials did their best to indoctrinate students, teaching them slogans of praise for the regime and "Father Saddam".

Now, almost a year after the regime fell, teachers and administrators in many parts of the country find those old habits difficult to break.

"The majority of schoolchildren [in the district] still keep to the old slogans, and have no intention of forgetting them," said primary school teacher Hana Khalaf in the predominantly Sunni suburb of al-Dura, east of Baghdad.

"The teaching staff have done everything we could to stop them repeating these slogans, but we've failed," Khalaf said.

The teachers have even received anonymous letters, which they believe to be from the students' older brothers, threatening them if they do not stop criticising the former regime.

Sometimes the threats are carried out.

Farah Abd al-Aziz, a history teacher in al-Wilada, the Sunni district of Abu Ghraib, was run down by a car and her leg broken in December, shortly after receiving a phone call threatening her for condemning the Baath party in front of her students.

"I didn't want to accuse anyone because I'm afraid of revenge, especially given... the lack of security and the absence of authority," she said.

Zein al-Abdeen, director of education in the west Baghdad al-Karkh 2 district, is disturbed that the former president still exerts such a hold over the students.

"He didn't love the children and didn't provide for them or for their schools," he said.

Ahmed Ezz al-Din, 8, from al-Buqaa primary school in Baaquba, north of Baghdad, believes "Saddam Hussein will return to power one day, and will liberate Iraq from the Jewish Americans".

He does not accept that the president was captured. "It's his double. Saddam is still fighting," Ahmed said. "Father Saddam is a hero, and we all love him. He is the only one who can strike Israel."

Whatever its source, Saddam's appeal is hard to break.

"We cannot take strict actions against children, as the former regime did," Abdeen said. "We use other means to solve the problem, such as spreading awareness among the children's families."

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Location: Israel
Iraqi Kurdistan
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